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'LANGUAGE': THICK MALT, WEIRD CREAM

By RICHARD CROMELIN

Noted songwriters Tom Waits and Leonard Cohen contribute liner notes to the album, but they don't sing on it. The two records feature members of more than a dozen local bands, including Black Flag, X, the Blasters, the Brat, Plugz and Bangles, but it's not the latest anthology of Los Angeles rock groups. In fact, aside from scattered songs by the likes of Dream Syndicate's Steve Wynn and the Last's Joe Nolte, "English as a Second Language" contains hardly any straight music at all. Instead, it's four sprawling sides of poetry, conversation, ranting and raving by a cross-section of poets, musicians, performance artists, street characters, music-scene denizens—you name it.

"Three people got on this record because they wrote me fan letters and said, 'I want to record for you,'" says Harvey Kubernik, the project's producer. "How often does that happen, where you can write somebody a letter and end up on a record next to Charles Bukowski?"

The "Second Language" package, just released on Kubernik's Freeway Records label, follows "Voices of the Angels," the 1982 spoken-word project that marked Kubernik's debut as an active producer. He'd been a background fixture on the music scene since he was a student at Fairfax High School, working as a journalist, landing an occasional record-company job, hanging out at recording sessions by Phil Spector and Brian Wilson, meeting and stockpiling a diverse roster of colorful characters and nurturing his patriotic passion for Los Angeles. He casts himself as an underdog and sees his two albums as a ringing statement for the city, himself and other neglected figures.

"For many years I sought endorsement and encouragement and respect," explains Kubernik, 31. "Those doors were never really opened. Now if people are going to shun these achievements and not acknowledge the raw, passionate heart demonstrated by some of these people, I'm not interested.

"I know that I'm doing something positive. I don't think these kind of records have ever been done before. I do these records to inspire people. If that doesn't happen I might as well pack it in. You can never look at society, and especially this city, the same if you spend any time with the albums I put out."

While "Voices" was designed specifically as a verbal travelog/portrait of Los Angeles, Kubernik had different aims for "English as a Second Language."

"The first album was primarily a Hollywood experience," he notes. "I had people come to Sunset and Western and some of the studios in that area. This album came together primarily in the beach, Venice. People had a renewed enthusiasm because they were seeing me out of a Hollywood context. There's a lot of that breezy, beatnik-era poetry-reading style. I was getting more urban tension when I was recording in Hollywood."

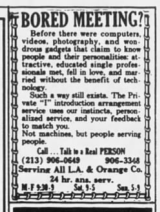
What did he get this time? "I see themes I may not agree with," he admits, "but I don't do any extensive editing of information. I saw some new, different, exciting and really confusing themes emerge that are very sexist and racist this time, though. These things bother me, but rather than throw them on the cutting-room floor, I decided even to showcase them at times. Not for shock treatment, but just because I thought they mirror our current society."

Maneuvering through the four densely packed sides of "Second Language" is a demanding task, but it's rewarded at many points: Exene Cervenka's pithy account of her meeting with singer Percy Mayfield; Blaster Dave Alvin's sketch of "Old White Women on Vermont"; poet Wanda Coleman's description of a harrowing restaurant robbery; writer Richard Meltzer's eulogy for the late rock-critic Lester Bangs; Bill Inglot's remarkable analysis of Jack Webb's sense of humor.

But you don't get to these without encountering several annoying conversations with some self-absorbed locals who air their shallow views on local subcultures in arrogantly arch tones. Passable as anthropology, perhaps, but hardly as art.

"I know up front that half a dozen of the 84 cuts are immediately 'Let's pick up the needle,'" Kubernik acknowledges. "I know that when it's being recorded. Nobody has to tell me that. But I didn't want to present just a thick, rich malt. I wanted to show some of the weird cream in there too."

Recorded poetry isn't exactly techno-pop when it comes to sales clout, but Kubernik doesn't need to sell that many copies to break even on his $5,000 invest-



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